Cities — 1917

The Wealthiest Negro Colony in the World

N Y C TIMES
SEPTEMBER 2, 1917

It Is in Upper Manhattan, and All the Luxuries Money Can Buy Are Found In Its Private Houses and Modern Apartments

IN uptown New York, occupying a section which a decade ago included one of the city's best residential districts, flourishes the wealthiest negro colony in the world. There are those among its members who count their fortunes in six figures.

Largely on account of the war the Harlem colony is enjoying the greatest prosperity in its prosperous history. It is growing by leaps and bounds. Two years ago John T. Clark, Field Secretary of the National League on Urban Conditions Among the Negroes, a national improvement society, estimated the negro population of the district at 50,000. Today he and other social workers figure it at about 70,000. It has been swelled materially in the last few years by negro immigration from the West Indies, and more recently from the South.

The colony extends roughly from 131st Street to 144th Street, and from Seventh Avenue to the Harlem River. It is, however, constantly lengthening and widening. On many cross streets it reaches as far west as Eighth Avenue. Within the confines of this area is to be found everything that the negro needs for his convenience, comfort, and pleasure. He has his apartment houses, his churches, his institutions, shops, restaurants, clubs, theatres, and dance halls.

His home may be as modest or as well appointed as he cares to make it. He may live in a furnished room house, in a boarding house, in apartments where the rent ranges from $20 to $60 a month, or in his own elegantly appointed residence. Several apartment houses are really luxurious. In the corridors the visitor will find soft, rich rugs, marble statuary, and valuable paintings. Liveried servants, sometimes foreign-born whites, are to be seen in the more pretentious homes. More than 500 negroes in the district occupy private houses which rent from $720 to $1,200 a year. More than 250 own their own homes. Philip A. Payton, a pioneer negro real estate man in Harlem, estimates that about one-third of the real estate in the section is owned by negroes.

"In 1900," he said last week, "there were few negroes hereabout. They were attracted here when they saw the prospect of clean, sanitary homes, for which many of them were well able to pay. There are in the city at least a dozen negroes who are each worth a quarter of a million dollars or more. Five hundred negroes own automobiles. There is a garage for their use. Their cars range from cheap second-hand machines to those of the newest and most expensive make. Several employ chauffeurs."

The colony has a dozen churches. The largest, St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church, is in 134th Street, near Seventh Avenue. It was designed by a firm of negro architects and was built at a cost of $250,000 a few years ago. In the rear is a large parish house. St. Philip's has 1,900 communicants, and a choir of forty voices. The Rev. Hutchens C. Bishop, the first negro to be graduated from the General Theological Seminary, in Chelsea Square, has been rector of the parish many years. His assistant is the Rev. Everard W. Daniel, graduate of New York University and of both the Union and the General Theological Seminary. The church has invested a deal of its funds in realty. The vestry is proud of the fact that the Sunday school last year contributed $1,000 to the church's funds. The parish house has reading and recreation rooms, a billiard and pool room, and a gymnasium. The church encourages athletics, and takes pride in its basket ball team, which last year defeated Hampton Institute and the Carlisle Indians. A member of the team is Fritz Pollard, the Brown University half-back who was selected by Walter Camp for his All-American Football Team.

The Metropolitan Baptist Church, at 120 West 138th Street, runs a grocery and butcher store and a real estate business for the benefit of its congregation. It recently started to purchase for investment purposes a house a month. In addition to the churches, there are countless religious missions. Many of them are regarded with suspicion by the negro pastors, who question the honesty of their motives and believe them to be a detriment to religion.

Negroes like to sing and dance wherever they are. In Harlem they have their cabarets and dance halls. Scattered about the colony are scores of lunch rooms and restaurants. There is one where food and prices compare with Broadway's best. It makes a specialty of Southern dishes and serves chicken cooked in a variety of ways by real Southern experts. The district supports a negro stock company, which presents standard plays and Broadway successes. Evening dress predominates among the colored occupants of the orchestra seats. There is also a negro vaudeville and moving-picture house. Naturally the district has its saloons, but investigators say drinking is on the decline thereabout.

The number of negroes in business for themselves in the black belt has increased surprisingly in a few years, until now they number 400. This is attributed largely to the immigration from the West Indies. Those islands contain a branch of the race which is alert and progressive. Five years ago there were fewer than 1,000 of them in Harlem. Today they represent more than a fourth of the population of the district. For the most part they are the negro pioneers who started business enterprises of their own.

Many of their concerns are incorporated and well capitalized. There is a negro company which owns a chain of twelve grocery stores. A negro physician recently arrived from the South with $100,000 to invest. He put $60,000 of it in Harlem realty. Another negro has put $10,000 in an installment business. Philip A. Payton and John M. Royall have made comfortable fortunes in the real estate business. The former owns a $25,000 home at Allenhurst, N. J. Negroes in Harlem own drug stores, toggery shops, barber shops, stationery stores, dressmaking establishments, cigar stores, and general merchandise stores. The professions are well represented by physicians, dentists, lawyers, and publishers.

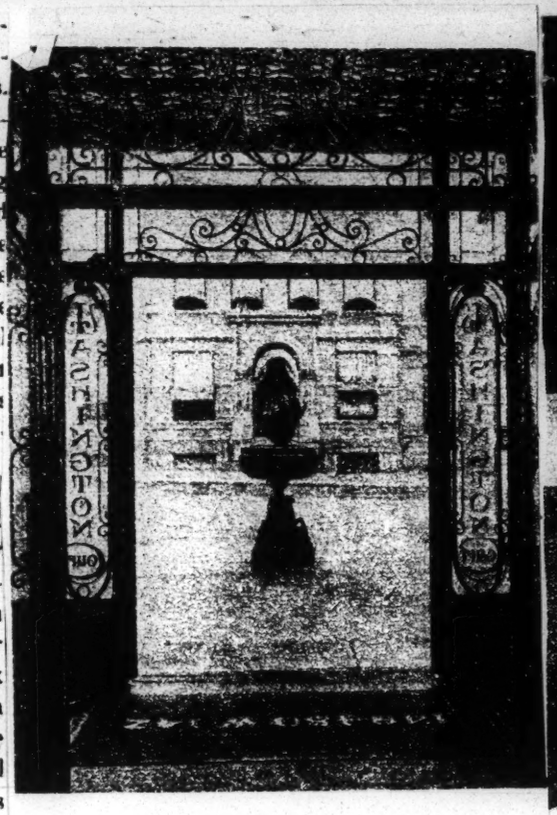
The colony supports three newspapers and a fraternal paper devoted to negro affairs. Little Africa's newspaper row is in West 135th Street and Seventh Avenue. The papers are The Amsterdam News, weekly, occupying a building on Seventh Avenue; The New York News, weekly, in 135th Street; The Voice, weekly, on Seventh Avenue, and The Fraternal Echo, semi-monthly. The Amsterdam News was established more than eight years ago and claims a circulation of 20,000 a week, with subscribers in every State. It has a staff of seven.

Any one visiting the zone is impressed by the number of "beauty parlors." Printed signs in the windows proclaim the merits of systems of scalp and hair remedies, and the stranger gets the idea that many members of the colored race must be afflicted with baldness, or think that their hair needs some sort of treatment. It is said that men and women with crisp, curly, or "kinky" hair, after several treatments by the specialists, appear among their friends with hair as straight as an Indian's. One woman has amassed a fortune from her hair preparations. She and her daughter own and occupy a large house in West 136th Street. It was built recently and, with its furnishings, probably cost about $50,000. The owner is called the wealthiest negro woman in the country. Fourteen years ago she was a washerwoman.

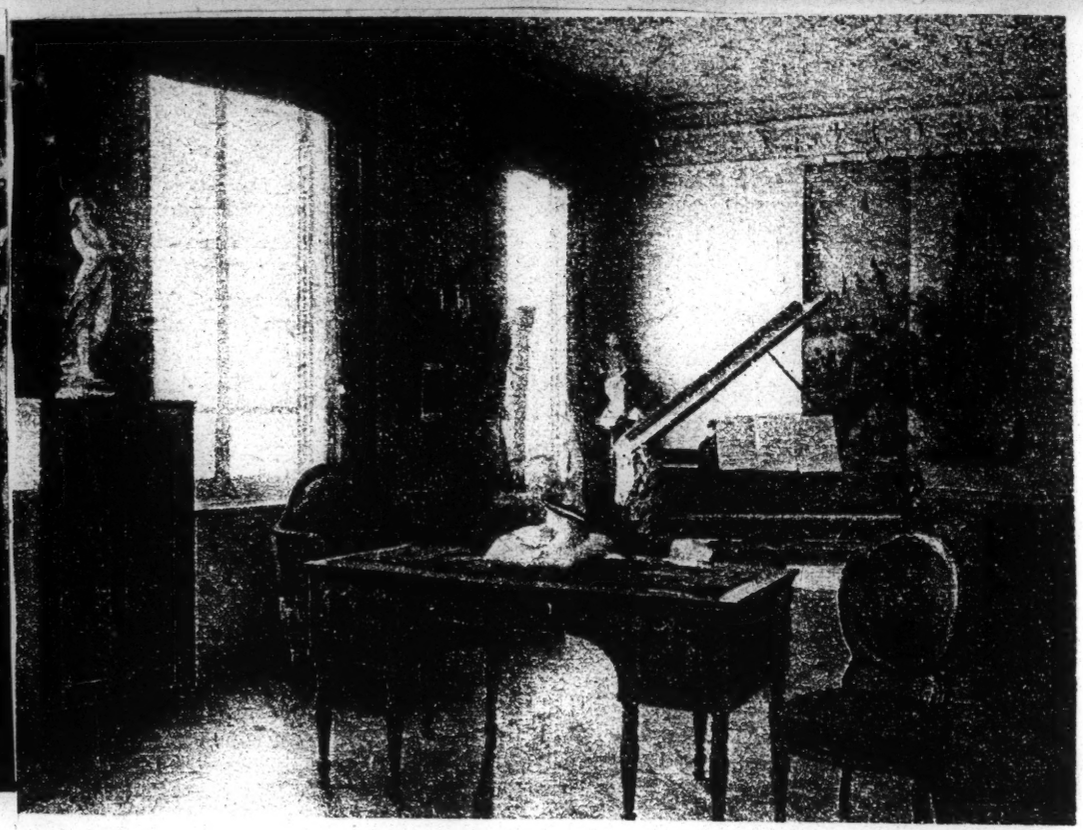
The National League on Urban Conditions Among the Negroes finds that 300 girls of the race in Harlem are earning $35 a month as domestics, and others

are working as stenographers, bookkeepers, and clerks. Many negroes are employed by the subway and the railroads. Hall boys and elevator runners are earning from $27 to $40 a month. The league reports that at present there is a strong demand for negro labor. It has found employment for 800 negroes during the planting and harvesting season in the Connecticut tobacco fields. Many of the tobacco workers are students who toil in the fields in the Summer to pay for their schooling in the Winter. Numbers of Southern negroes are now being employed on docks and freight terminals.

Social life in the colony finds its expression in church festivals and clubs. Among the principal clubs are the New York Colored Men's Business Association, United Civic League, and Pullman Porters' Club. During the Summer months, on Sundays and holidays, Lenox and Seventh Avenues are crowded with the men, women, and children of the colony. The visitor may see there all manner of style and dress just as he does downtown among New Yorkers of lighter hues. Negroes in loud checked suits and flaming ties rub elbows with negroes of the most sombre dress and mien. Much beribboned women in cool, white dresses and carrying gay parasols make the avenues ring with their laughter and chatter, furnishing a contrast to almost as many who are soberly garbed. The principal war topic, it may be remarked, is the Fifteenth Regiment, N. G. N. Y., of which the colony is tremendously proud. It will tell you that the regiment was the first in the State to receive its full military quota, and that when it gets to the front and into the fighting it will do the same valiant deeds as a certain other negro regiment did at San Juan Hill, Santiago, Cuba, back in 1898.

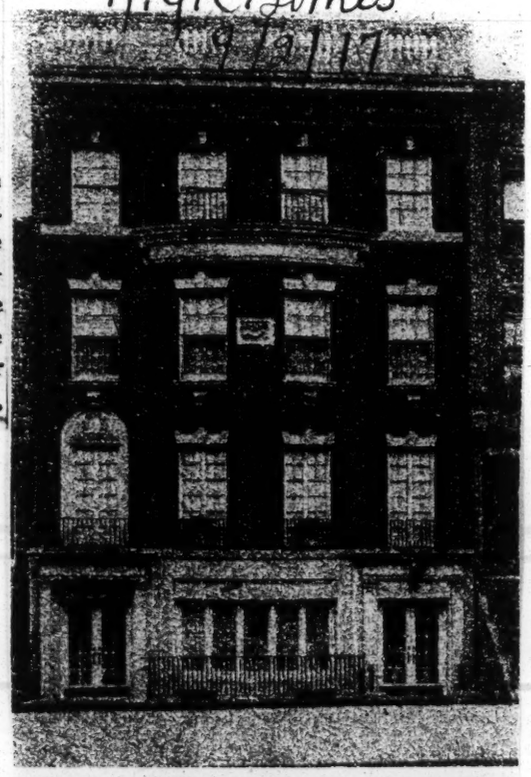


Entrance to an Apartment House Where Tenants Are All Negroes.
Times Photo Service.



This Is the "Salon" in a House Owned and Occupied by the Woman Who Made Her Fortune on a Preparation for Straightening Hair.

N.Y.C. Times 9/9/17



Exterior of Home Owned by Hair Treatment Manufacturer.
Times Photo Service.